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DISCOURSE

ON THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF

HOWARD TOWNSEND, M. D.,

BY

RUFUS W. CLARK, D. D.

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ON THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF

HOWARD TOWNSEND, M. D.,

Late Professor of Materia Medica and Physiology in the Albany Medical College;

PREACHED IN THE

NORTH DUTCH CHURCH, ALBANY,

SUNDAY MORNING, JAN. 20TH, 1867.

BY

Rev. RUFUS W. CLARK, D. D.

*Presented
by H. March*

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DISCOURSE.

REVELATIONS XIV, 13.

“ I HEARD A VOICE FROM HEAVEN, SAYING UNTO ME WRITE, BLESSED ARE THE DEAD WHICH DIE IN THE LORD.”

During the past week a dark cloud has thrown a deep shadow over our city. From the cloud the lightning of affliction has struck not one family alone, but many. Gazing upon that lightning flash that has taken the life of the good physician, the kind friend and the sincere Christian, I have studied to learn its import. Looking upon the dark cloud, my thoughts have involuntarily striven to penetrate its solemn mysteries, and read its lessons, to me, to you, to our whole community. For it has its lessons, important, earnest, pressing, else the bereavement would not have been sent. The case is one that has stirred my own spirit most deeply ; that has at times bewildered me, and filled my heart with mingled amazement and grief. That one in the meridian of life, and until recently, in apparently

vigorous health; one in the full tide of scientific and literary pursuits, and occupying a wide field of usefulness; one embosomed in the warm affections of a large circle of relatives and friends, should be so suddenly snatched away, is a providence that has no solution, viewed from the earthly stand point. But looking beyond and above the cloud to the source of all life, and the arbiter of all destinies, "I heard a voice." It was the voice of him who overcame death and the grave; who brought life and immortality to light; who can solve all mysteries to the trusting heart; who can make all things clear to the eye of faith. "I heard a voice from Heaven, saying unto me write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord." The earthly form is cold, still, silent; but the spirit is blessed. Having passed away in the Lord, it is now happy in his presence; happy in the peaceful realms of everlasting felicity. Thus heaven alone can solve the import of the death of the saints. From the throne of God comes the light that dissipates the darkness of the tomb. From all the dealings of Providence we are taught the vital connection between the present and the future light. We are taught

the necessity of making adequate and speedy preparation to follow those who have gone before us to the spirit land. And when the lessons are so marked, and the character so full of instruction, as in the case of the friend who has so recently left us, we are impelled by every motive of interest and affection to pause and read the virtues, and learn the lessons that are placed before us.

Dr. Howard Townsend was born in this city, on the 22d day of November, 1823. He was early dedicated to God, and was reared amid the most happy domestic and christian influences. The memory of his mother he cherished through life, with enthusiastic devotion. Her triumphant and glorious death, he often thought and spoke of; and the light from that scene seemed to illumine his own pathway, and nerve his spirit for the struggles of the last hour. His early and warm affection for his brothers and sisters was never displaced by other ties and interests, but was retained through life. His heart was large enough to contain two homes, and, I may add, three; and the hallowed influences of his childhood home seemed ever to rest upon him, and to aid him in reproducing in his own beautiful home

the virtues and joys that attended his infant footsteps, and entered into the scenes of his early years.

Howard prosecuted his studies at the Albany Academy and at Poughkeepsie. Of his diligence as a student; his retentive memory; his thirst for knowledge; and his rapid progress in the various branches, to which he gave his attention, I need not speak, in the presence of those who were familiar with his early history. All those characteristics that marked his maturer career as a scholar; his pure and delicate taste; his fondness for scientific research and classical learning, and his readiness to explore all the departments of literature, may be traced to their germs, in the studious and thoughtful boy. At this period too, he was equally distinguished for his keen sense of honor, his moral integrity, and his kind and benevolent disposition. That extreme courteousness which belonged to his nature, was extended alike to all; and to please and benefit others, seemed to be his highest gratification. This characteristic grew with his growth and strengthened with his strength. It became a habit, and, sanctified by divine grace, it became

a bright Christian virtue, that shed its light and its benediction upon all around him. Whether in youth or in manhood; whether you met him alone or in general society; at the festive board, or in his family, he was the same kind, affable and cheerful Christian gentleman. In this particular he is worthy of universal imitation; and if universally imitated, we are confident that the aggregate of human happiness would be vastly increased. The Creator has made us social beings, and we are mutually dependent upon each other for a thousand sources of enjoyment. A look, a smile, a word, a grasp of the hand, has in it a power for good, that is too often overlooked. It is not alone by the prosecution of great enterprises, and moving in conspicuous public spheres, that society is benefited. It is blessed, and, perhaps, mainly, by those private courtesies and every day attentions, that constitute so large a portion of social life. The Apostolic injunction is, "be courteous;" and were this generally obeyed we should have more of Christianity; more of the spirit of the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, diffused through society.

Having completed his preparatory studies, Howard entered Union College at Schenectady. Here he won golden opinions by his accurate scholarship, his correct and honorable deportment, and his salutary influence over his fellow students.

Graduating with honor, he attended two full courses of lectures at the Albany Medical College, in 1845-6; and also a third course at Philadelphia. Receiving there his Degree, he sailed in 1847 for Europe, and spent several years in the medical schools of Paris, availing himself of the rare advantages in medical science, afforded by those institutions. He spent much time in the hospitals of Paris, studying the various forms of disease, and alleviating human suffering wherever it was found. As he spoke the French language with fluency, he could minister to that people as easily as to his own countrymen.

Returning to his native city, Dr. Townsend opened an office in State street, and practiced successfully for several years. He was soon appointed one of the physicians to the Albany hospital. Here he moved among the unfortunate inmates as a messenger of love and mercy—

ministering to the souls as well as the bodies of the sufferers. To his work he brought his medical knowledge, gathered from two hemispheres, and arranged and applied by his own skill and genius. He brought a mind filled with the principles of the gospel, and a heart imbued with its benevolent spirit. To the poor also outside of the College, he delighted to minister, and from these he would never receive any remuneration. One of his associate professors in the Medical College has informed me, that he never knew Dr. Townsend to accept of pay for services rendered to individuals. Thus was he eminent in a profession, itself eminent for its noble benevolence and its charities to the poor. Often, too, besides giving his services, he would pay for the medicines needed, and contribute in other ways to relieve the wants of the suffering. Entertaining the most exalted views of the profession of his choice, his aim was to reach his ideal of a Christian physician, and to serve the Divine Master, to whom he had consecrated his life. And we may imagine that master, whom he has already met in glory, saying to him, "I was hungry and you gave me meat, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I

was sick and you visited me, and ministered unto me;" and he shall say to the master, "when did I see thee hungry, or thirsty, or sick, and ministered unto thee. And he shall answer, "inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me."

In the autumn of 1852, Dr. Townsend was appointed a Professor in the Albany Medical College. The chair which he at first occupied not being entirely suited to his taste, he was, at the death of Dr. Beck, appointed Professor of *Materia Medica* and Physiology. As a lecturer he was distinguished for his clearness and accuracy, and his thorough knowledge of the subjects that he treated. He succeeded not only in imparting valuable knowledge, but in awakening in the students under his care an enthusiasm in their pursuits; and at least an outward respect for the principles of religion that he held.

The affections of the students he gained by a personal attention to their wants, and by his cordial response to any requests for favors that it was in his power to render them. The books in his library were always at their command, and whatever aid he could privately give them

in their studies, was most cheerfully rendered. Not unfrequently he would be applied to for pecuniary assistance in the form of a loan, and he was ready to grant it, and without any subsequent anxiety as to the amount being refunded to him. Against anything bordering upon parsimony, his nature revolted.

In 1866, twenty years after his first connection, as a student, with the Albany Medical College, he said to the Faculty: "I have received most of my medical education in this institution, and have always felt that I ought to have graduated here; but at the time of my graduation, this institution was not as well known in Europe as the University of Pennsylvania, and I desired to take a diploma from that institution. I wish now to have a diploma from the Albany Medical College, and to be a graduate of the Institution."

This degree was conferred by the Trustees with the graduating class of 1866, dating back to the year of his last attendance at this College.

By his associate professors, Dr. Townsend was held in the highest esteem and warmest affection, as appears from the series of resolutions adopted and published by them. The feelings

also of the Medical Faculty of the Albany Hospital are expressed in touching resolutions, of which the following is one :

“ Resolved, That in sorrow we record his loss. Vigilant and faithful in the performance of his professional labors ; kind and unwearied in his ministrations to the sick ; courteous, conscientious and manly in his intercourse with his professional associates, he combined in an eminent degree those elements which constitute the good physician and the true gentleman.”

The Board of Trustees of the Albany Academy, and the Board of Public Instruction, have also in most appropriate words expressed their sense of his worth. Of the resolutions offered by a member of the Board of Public Instruction, the following is one :

“ Resolved, That in his death, science has lost an able and successful advocate ; benevolent and religious institutions a practical supporter ; the poor and needy a kind sympathiser and friend, and this community one of its noblest citizens, ever ready to engage in every enterprise calculated to advance its prosperity.”

The Albany County Medical Society adopted the following resolution :

“ Resolved, That we, the members of the Albany County Medical Society, have assembled to-day with feelings of no ordinary sorrow, to express our respect and affection for our departed brother, Dr. Howard Townsend, who, by his unspotted and most useful life, not less than by his eminent, intellectual and professional endowments, has graced and honored our profession. By the consenting judgment of the whole of this community in which his life was passed, no one stood higher in all the qualities of mind and character which inspire respect, confidence and affection. With mental powers naturally vigorous and carefully disciplined by every advantage of study and culture at home and abroad, he combined unusual enthusiasm

and diligence in the pursuit of his profession and of kindred sciences. To these were added the most attractive and endearing personal qualities, a gentle and benignant temper, a strong sense of right and duty, a high and generous feeling that ever manifested itself in all his words and actions. With a deep sense of the loss we have sustained, we feel that in cherishing his memory and imitating his example we shall best honor him, and ennoble our lives and profession."

But if our departed friend shone in the public walks of life, his virtues shed even a purer and brighter lustre upon his private and domestic relations. He loved with an enthusiastic and abiding ardor, his home. He had a religious regard for the tender relations of husband and father. As a father he sought the purest development and highest happiness of his children. He made them his companions, and mingled gentleness with firmness in his intercourse with them. His family government was in the heart, and not in the rod. The atmosphere of that home was love. But his earthly home he will never again enter. In our social circles his cheerful presence will be no more greeted. He will return to us no more. But we may go to him. If we love the Saviour in whom he trusted; if we catch and reflect as he did, the spirit of the gospel, we may meet him in the realms of the blessed. And from his cold form, to-day lying motionless in the

tomb, there comes a voice to each of us, "Be ye also ready, for in an hour when ye think not the Son of Man cometh."

It speaks to me, and the voice rings through the most secret chambers of my soul. I cannot tell when the death messenger has seemed to me so vivid, so mysterious, so startling, as in this providence. It has made to me a new revelation of the extremely slender thread that holds us to this life. If such an one can fall, who is safe? I ask what is life? And the answer comes from this event as well as from inspiration, "It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." I ask about the days of man, and the answer comes, "As for man his days are as grass; as a flower of the field so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more."

Standing in the centre of this tragical scene I look around me and I see nothing but shadows. Wealth is a shadow; worldly positions and honors are shadows. The prizes of life, after which many so earnestly strive, are shadows. The ties of friendship and kindred are frail as the spider's

web. We lay our plans, and pursue our avocations, and fill the future with ideal prosperity, and death comes and all here is as nothing.

But what shall we do? Stand still, stunned by calamities, and bewildered by mysteries? No. For through the calamity and through the mystery there comes a voice to us saying, "Work while the day lasts, for the night cometh in which no man can work." Work for God, for Christ, for souls, for Heaven. Work for the enduring, the immortal. That voice your pastor would listen to, and work by the presentation of divine truth to your souls, by prayer for your spiritual advancement, by a warm sympathy for you in your struggles and aspirations. For these ends the pulpit is instituted, and churches organised, and the services of the sanctuary conducted. And if God will but accept this pulpit, as the medium through which his divine power may be felt, and his gracious influences reach your hearts, all will be well. Our dependence is entirely upon him. Even a Paul may plant and an Apollos water, but God must give the increase.

This voice speaks to the professing Christian before me. "Work while the day lasts." How

much is to be done to repair the damages that the soul has suffered from the ravages of sin; to cultivate holy principles of action, to form a character that God will look upon with approbation; to prove your loyalty to Heaven. It is a solemn and startling fact, and one that should arouse us to the utmost diligence, and the most intense activity, that such great duties and vast responsibilities are crowded within this narrow space of time. We are here, in these few brief years, to study the most momentous themes that can engage the attention of intelligent beings. We cannot afford to waste a day or lose an hour. We cannot afford to allow our affections and energies to become entangled in the frivolities, cares, and pursuits of this transient life. Higher ends and nobler objects demand our time and the forces of our being. We are here to make preparation to pass the portals of the grave; to stand in the presence of the great Judge; to be fitted for the duties and joys and glories of immortal ages. What then you have to do for yourselves, for the church, for the world, do quickly. Would you set an example of Christian zeal, devotion and achievement, worthy of universal imitation,

labor for this; labor rapidly, for the night of death cometh in which no man can work. Would you have the world better for your having lived in it; would you deposit in the ever working moral universe of God, influences and forces that will survive your death, and yield eternal and heavenly fruits; work for this with all your might.

This voice speaks to the impenitent before me. It tells you that now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation. To-morrow repentance, tears, resolutions, may be too late. Will you not accept of the offers and opportunities of to-day? Shall not the angel messenger now hovering over this congregation, and about to carry your decision to heaven, bear the tidings of your repentance of sin, and faith in Christ?

We are all hastening, pastor and people, to that eternal world, so recently entered by our departed brother. The deep, rapid, irresistible tide of time is bearing us on. That tide no human power can, in the least degree, check. The great laws under which we live and move, no man can reverse. As then we cannot escape death, let us prepare to meet it. Let us so live

that death shall be life, immortal life; that the fading out of this world may be the opening of everlasting glory.

“ Beyond this flight of time,
 Beyond the reign of death,
 There surely is some blessed clime
 Where life is not a breath ;
 Nor life's affections transient fire,
 Whose sparks fly upward and expire.

“ There is a world above,
 Where parting is unknown ;
 A long eternity of love,
 Formed for the good alone ;
 And faith beholds the dying here,
 Translated to that glorious shpere.

“ Thus star by star declines,
 Till all are passed away,
 As morning high and higher shines
 To pure and perfect day ;
 Nor sink those stars in empty night,
 But hide themselves in Heaven's own light.”

